Carlos Lopez

Dr. Amy (Amanda) Fish

KHC ST111 Studio I

9 October 2019

**The expectation of Rankine’s character in Citizen**

Everybody defines their own personal character. We shape it through our actions and choices which in turn shape us to who we are. In “*Citizen: An American Lyric*” author Claudia Rankine presents us to her experience as an American citizen of color, and it is through her eyes that she shows us how despite the fact that she is a contributing member of the American society, she still faces discrimination and alienation due to the subtle differences of her character from the character of an expected white model citizen. However, Rankine shows us her resistance to this pressure to change by breaking the norm through her actions and even through her literary work such as with the absence of the pronoun “I” which becomes a placeholder for what society wants Claudia Rankine to be since her true self crumbles in the face of expectation due to her identity and character not being able to fit in the first person.

“ ‘I’ is supposed to hold what is not there until it is. Then *what is* comes apart the closer you are to it” (71). Rankine writes this quote to relate how she feels a disconnect between who society says she is supposed to be and who she actually feels she is. As a result, she avoids the use of the first person for two main reasons. By using the second and third person with the words “you” and “it” rather than the first (71), she generalizes this feeling of alienation to her audience since she understands that this feeling might not apply to everyone. She simultaneously refuses to represent herself through the first person and hence does not limit herself to what society expects her to be. She then acknowledges that the first person is nothing more than a “symbol for something”(71). It is just a simplification of what a person might be. However, she also acknowledges that “ ‘I’ has so much power; it’s insane”(71). Despite the pronoun being just a word, it has the power to change peoples’ identities for fear that they might be alienated from the rest of the world, and Rankine shows us that she constantly feels this societal pressure weighing her down through the use of a passerby who is “all gloved up, in a big coat, with fancy fur around the collar[…]saying, you should be scared, the first person can’t pull you together” (71). Clearly, the passerby does not say this out loud but through the stare she throws at Rankine, she can easily infer this. The author more directly acknowledges this through the quote “you are reading minds, but did you try?”(71) referring to the fact that she senses the pressure of society all focused in the single intimidating look of this passerby. In addition, Rankine utters the first curse word in the whole book “Shit” (70) which further reveals her frustration at the thought of people constantly reminding her that she does not fit within “I.”

This frustration is then explored when Rankine tells us the many ways in which she has tried to come to terms with this alienation. She has tried everything from writing poetry to express herself and liberate her frustration, to facing the facts head on to try and come to terms with them, and even by looking for answers in religion and sacred scriptures, or, in her own words, she has “Tried rhyme, tried truth, tried epistolary untruth, tried, and tried. You really did”(71). Following up with the logic behind why Rankine does not use the first person, she proceeds to tell the reader to “never mind our unlikeness, you too have heard the noise in your voice”(71) to imply that the reader has also felt left out and alienated before and to provide an answer to this alienation by encouraging them to associate with her and empathize with how she feels. As a matter of fact, she then invites the reader to “…sit down. Sit here alongside” (71) and starts treating him/her as an equal, maybe even as a part of herself. At this point, Rankine sops using the second and third person, for the reader and her are treated as one being. “Drag that first person out of the social dream of history, then we’re kin.”(72). She acknowledges that there could be unity among people if we got rid of that first person in the singular sense and the division it carries with it, and starts speaking in terms of “we” and “our” since those terms provide unity and include everyone’s identity and character under one category. She does this until the reader’s views start differing from Rankine’s. “Maybe you don’t agree. Maybe you don’t think so”(72). It’s at this point that Rankine goes back to treating the reader as a separate individual and addressing him/her in the second person. Rankine starts seeing the difference between herself and the reader in that the reader may think that nothing wrong was done in the past and that society is already pretty unified. “Maybe you are right, you don’t really have anything to confess”(72). However, if that is the case, why is there a disconnect between Rankine and the reader? “Why are you standing?”(72)

Even then, despite the differences in opinions between Rankine and the reader, Rankine still desires to be united with her fellow reader and, by extension, society. Remember, Rankine, much like any other person out there, does not want to live alone and excluded, but she also does not want to give up what makes her the person she is. Still, she takes a step back, apologizes, and talks directly to the actual reader and acknowledges that she might be wrong about the person reading the book, and that she’s addressing the previous quotes to an elite, high-class reader that she imagined could have been reading her book. She “was creating a life study of a monumental first person, a Brahmin first person”(73). Despite that, she wants to remain united even if she does not agree with the opinions of her fellow citizens. Therefore, if her actual reader *is* that type of Brahmin person and persists that nothing wrong was done in the past and that society is already pretty unified, then she still invites him/her to “Join me down here in nowhere…sit down and pull together” (73). Rankine still believes that that person’s vision is occluded. They have a false perception of reality. “Yours is a strange dream, a strange reverie”(73), but she acknowledges that their perception is equally valid as her own perception since both of them are based on the opinions of a single person. “No, it’s a strange beach; each body is a strange beach”(73) However, Rankine hopes that despite their different views on society, all people will be able to connect their beaches through empathizing with each other and realizing they are all human beings that feel, for “if you let in the excess emotion, you will recall the Atlantic Ocean breaking on our heads”(73).

Claudia Rankine feels as though she is a victim of alienation and discrimination due to her race, an outcast of society if you will. However, she does not want to give up her uniqueness and identity to fit within what others consider normal, what “I” and the idea of the first person represents. Instead, she wants to be accepted for who she is and be part of a unified community where despite people not having the same identities, ideas, or opinions, they can all coexist together as part of a collective of “Citizen[s].”

**Works Cited**

Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Penguin, 2015.